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ABSTRACT

Grade inflation is discussed, and some solutions are offered for the grade inflation problem which exists in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. Examples illustrate the existence of grade inflation at several colleges and universities, as well as at the high school level. Various reactions--involving college admission standards, selection of honors students, and grading practices--are reported. A number of explanations for the inflation of college grades are explored, including faculty's reasons for increased leniency and lowering of standards. Statistical analysis of the grades of graduate and undergraduate education majors at the University of Victoria between 1968 and 1975 indicates that significant inflation has occurred. The author recommends that an institutional grading policy be developed, and that it be explicitly defined for the benefit of all students and faculty. The examination of inconsistent grading practices between different instructors and divisions is also advised. (GDC)

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GRADE INFLATION

by

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October 1975

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GRADE INFLATION

by

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I would like to present some ideas on a topic that has received considerable attention during the last year. The topic is "Grade Inflation." The paper is divided into five parts. First, some examples of grade inflation. Second, some reactions of people and institutions to the problems created by grade inflation. Third, some hypotheses that people have brought forward to explain grade inflation. Fourth, I would like to ask and answer the question "Are grades in the Faculty of Education in the University of Victoria undergoing grade inflation?" And last, I would like to present some suggestions for consideration related to the problem of grade inflation and grade distributions.

PART I

Examples of grade inflation can be found in many current popular magazines and newspapers, such as Newsweek, New York Times, and others. For example, in 1961 about half the seniors at Harvard graduated with honours, while the graduating class of 1974 had an astonishing 82% classified as honours. The average University of Colorado student in 1964 maintained a grade point average of 2.4 (out of a possible 4), but his counterpart today has a g.p.a. 2.82. Between 1962 and 1972 the University of Carolina doubled the percentage of A's handed out. The average grade at the University of Wisconsin rose from a C+ to a B+ in just nine years. The dean's list at the University of Virginia included 53% of the student body last year--compared with 21% in 1965.

A researcher at Michigan State University reported on the responses to grade trends he received from 197 colleges and universities. The average increase in grade points from 1960 to 1973 at those institutions was about

half a letter grade. He found that the rate of increase in grade point average was slow in the early 1960's, but it began to accelerate after 1965, and reached its highest rate between '68 and '70. Grades continued to increase rapidly between 1970 and 1972. They also increased between 1972 and 1973, but at a slower rate. An official at the University of Michigan reported that for freshmen in 1973-74 the fall and winter grade point averages were 2.82 and 2.83 on a 4 point scale. Those were the highest ever earned by Michigan freshmen. And yet, at the same time it was reported that the freshmen class was "the weakest in more than two decades" in terms of its performance on standardized tests.

The American College Testing Program reports that high school grades have increased since the mid 1960's. The average increase calculated over four subjects between 1967 and 1970 was .1. Between 1970 and 1973 the high school average increased .14.

PART II

Reaction to grade inflation has come from a number of centers. Graduate school officials are beginning to dismiss the transcripts of their applicants as plainly misleading and are concentrating instead on standardized tests scores. Even more disturbing, since everyone seems to be getting A's and B's, professional schools and employers are resorting to an Old School Tie elitism in their selections: better a Stanford A, they reason, than equal honours from a less familiar school.

Dickinson College has stopped preparing a dean's list because it felt rising grades and changes in grading practices had made the list meaningless.

The General Secretary of Phi Kelta Kappa reports that, to keep their membership select, many of the 214 Chapters are raising their minimum requirements.

A conservative columnist, George M. Will, in the Wall Street Journal views the phenomenon of grade inflation with alarm and says that it represents a collapse of the standards and rigor, and "makes one worry about the condition of higher education."

Stanford University has officially restored the D grade for undergraduates effective this fall. Since 1970 Stanford had used the A, B, C, pass system of grades with the loss of academic credit the only penalty for unsatisfactory performance. Since 1969, letter grade averages have risen from slightly above a straight B to a B+ for undergraduates. Bringing back the D was recommended unanimously by a Faculty-Student Committee as a means of combating grade inflation and making the C more respectable.

PART III

Here are some of the suggested reasons why grades are inflating. First, the abilities of students were and are increasing. However, we know from evidence presented by the Educational Testing Service and the American College Testing Program that the reverse is true. Students' abilities are going down. The average American College Testing composite scores have declined approximately one standard score, or about one-fifth of a standard deviation, over the eight year period 1965 to 1972. During that time period the decline in English and mathematics was about one standard score, but in social studies it was two standard scores, while in natural sciences there

was essentially no change. The average score of high school students on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, developed by the Educational Testing Service, dropped dramatically between 1974 and 1975, down 10 points on the verbal section and 8 points on the mathematical section. The declines were the largest ever reported by the College Entrance Examination Board, which has comparable data on the scores of high school seniors going back to 1956. Over that period the average scores rose to a high in 1963, declined slowly from 1964 through '68 and have been dropping more rapidly ever since. So we can dismiss the first hypothesis that the abilities of the students were and are increasing. Another hypothesis to explain grade inflation is that students are working harder these days because they face a fairly competitive job market after graduation. Another suggested reason is that faculty members faced with the need to keep enrolments up in economic hard times, have become less willing to grade rigorously for fear of turning away students. Another suggestion is that there is general dissatisfaction with traditional marking and grading. This began during the tumultuous 1960's. It was then, many American professors admit, that they started to give higher grades than their students deserved for fear that low marks might drop the students out of school and into the jungles of Viet Nam. It was then, too, that many colleges adopted pass-fail systems under which students could opt for traditional grades, neutral evaluations or both. One can also point out that some institutions dropped D's and F's in response to criticism that grades were arbitary measures of student performance and should not be used to penalize students. As a result, the C which used to be a fairly respectable grade became the lowest passing grade a student could earn. Faculty members

then began awarding more B's to avoid giving the competent, but not brilliant, student the no longer respectable C. Thus schools have caused grade averages to rise simply by dropping the use of marks denoting failure. At Yale, for example, a student's F is noted on private college records, but never appears on transcripts that reach eyes outside the university. Another suggestion is that the increase in grades between 1960 and 1968, may represent the re-adjustment from the rather harsh grading standards adopted during the post-Sputnick period. This was a period when colleges were limiting enrolments and stressing high standards. Another possible cause is the general atmosphere, or growth, in the freedom of the faculty to be more divergent and for students to have more voice in academic affairs. The recent mission of providing for minority students may have had an influence. Colleges have been recruiting increasingly diverse student bodies in terms of socioeconomic background and intellectual abilities. Faculty members have shifted their grading practices rather than judge all students on a traditional bases. Another suggestion is that grade inflation itself becomes a spiralling process. Once faculty members hear of it on other campuses, they consciously or unconsciously begin to inflate the grades of their own students, to give them an edge in the competition for jobs or places in professional schools. Another suggestion is that faculty members have lost confidence in the value of what they are doing. Because they have doubts about the value of the "learning" they are offering students, they are unwilling to make rigorous judgements on whether students have mastered it. Another viewpoint suggests that the addition of more "relevant and contemporary" materials to many courses has made

mastering the subject matter easier for students, since they are being tested on materials that are part of their everyday experience rather than relics of the high culture.

Finally, a report put out by the American College Testing Program includes the following: "although there are many alternative hypotheses which could explain the increase in grades while test scores are declining, only one seems adequate. We attribute the rise in grade point averages, both at the high school and college level, to increased leniency in the evaluation of student performance; that is to a lowering of academic standards, arbitrary as they were, of past years.

I think that we can say that virtually all the hypotheses about grade inflation have some possibility. However, identifying the most important factors poses difficult problems. Most of the questions about grading practices must be answered by the same faculty members who are giving the grades.

PART IV

Are grades in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria undergoing grade inflation? Table I shows grade trends in undergraduate and graduate courses combined for the period 1969-1975. Table 2 presents the trends in undergraduate grades during the same period by level. Figure 1 shows graphically the data presented in Table 1. Figure 2 depicts the trends in first class grades by level as listed in Table 2.

The tables and diagrams show that great inflation has occurred in the Faculty of Education during the last seven years. Chi Square analysis of the various proportions verify that there have been very statistically

significant changes over time. Is grade inflation a serious problem? Should we concern ourselves with grade inflation? The answer to both questions is a definite YES. Grade inflation destroys the meaning of grades and in the long run hurts students who are the primary group that should benefit from a rational and fair grading system.

PART V

Here are some suggestions relative to stopping grade inflation and hopefully improving our current grading procedures.

1. Faculty of Education and the five divisions within the Faculty should define the purpose of letter grades and the meaning of letter grades at the various levels of abstraction. These statements would supply a much needed orientation for both instructors and students. As grades are basically a communication device, all of us must see letter grades in terms of a unified framework.

For example, the following statement at a relatively high level of abstraction is one that the Faculty might consider adopting.

Definition of Grades

A student's work is rated in accordance with the following definitions:

A--To obtain this grade, the student must have shown uniformly the following qualities: (1) thorough comprehension and retention of both the facts and the principles of the subject; (2) ability to reproduce these facts and principles orally and/or in writing readily, accurately and concisely; (3) power to correlate the material and other branches of the subject and with other subjects; (4) individual reaction to the material shown by ability to apply the methods of the course to new and original problems and situations with reasonably good results, etc.

Using these relatively abstract statements of letter grade meaning, divisions could then issue more specific statements concerning the meaning of letter grades within their various special areas and/or courses.

2. Each instructor should print on the course outline the meaning of different letter grades and the minimum student tasks that are related to the different letter grade levels as well as how the various tasks are to be evaluated.

3. Each instructor should print on the course outline for each section of the course the distribution of grades that were awarded to similar sections over the previous two years with an explanation of the appropriateness of the printed distribution for the current course and section.

4. Each course should be evaluated once every two years by a committee of five, including one student and three members from outside the division mainly responsible for the course. The committee should pass judgement on the appropriateness of the required student tasks as they relate to the education profession. The committee should also judge the standards used to equate the quality of the students' competence at each letter grade level. The payoff would include among other advantages a greater understanding within the Faculty of the complexities of different specialties and, hopefully, point out unnecessary duplication across courses.

5. Each year a printout of all grades awarded in all sections of all courses conducted by the Faculty of Education should be filed in each divisional office. Names of instructors should be printed alongside each section number. Within division grade distribution should be studied by all members of a division each year.

In conclusion, we must develop an Institutional Policy with regard to grades and make the policy explicit to all. Ignoring the problem of inconsistency among instructors and possibly among divisions is not being responsible. If we avoid the problem and let the current trend continue, students will suffer and our Faculty will lose status locally and nationally.

Talk presented to the Faculty of Education, University of Victoria, Symposium on Grading, October 10, 1975.

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Faculty of Education

University of Victoria

TABLE 1 Distribution of Undergraduate and Graduate Grades 1969-1975

YEAR	Total	Percent Distribution				
		1st	2nd	Pass	Fail	Other
1968/69	6048	21.1	42.3	21.9	2.1	12.3
1969/70	8025	21.0	45.1	20.2	3.2	10.3
1970/71	7833	23.4	42.4	19.5	4.0	10.4
1971/72	7078	26.3	42.0	17.6	3.2	10.6
1972/73	6550	29.1	43.7	14.6	3.0	9.4
1973/74	7088	35.3	41.3	10.3	2.1	10.6
1974/75	8505	34.1	44.7	12.1	2.0	6.7

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October, 1975

Faculty of Education
University of Victoria

TABLE 2 DISTRIBUTION OF UNDERGRADUATE GRADES BY LEVEL 1969-1975

Level	Year	Total	Percent Distribution				
			1st	2nd	Pass	Fail	Other
100	1968/69	901	13.4	40.0	19.0	3.3	24.0
	1969/70	1289	14.7	37.3	24.6	5.5	17.6
	1970/71	1347	11.7	29.9	25.6	7.7	25.0
	1971/72	927	12.2	39.3	15.7	4.0	28.4
	1972/73	951	12.8	41.7	16.2	5.8	23.2
	1973/74	1134	17.1	36.3	18.0	6.9	22.3
	1974/75	1382	16.4	44.7	18.8	5.3	14.4
200	1968/69	1027	11.1	22.9	21.1	4.5	40.1
	1969/70	1078	12.7	24.3	16.4	4.4	42.0
	1970/71	748	21.9	23.9	12.8	4.0	37.2
	1971/72	633	16.4	19.2	12.9	4.4	46.9
	1972/73	541	14.9	24.9	15.3	4.2	40.4
	1973/74	625	39.8	14.0	3.5	0.8	41.7
	1974/75	620	37.9	19.0	7.4	3.2	32.4
300 & 400	1968/69	1972	22.7	46.5	24.2	1.2	5.2
	1969/70	2859	22.1	48.5	21.7	3.2	4.3
	1970/71	3385	23.3	48.5	19.8	3.5	4.6
	1971/72	3496	27.6	44.3	20.5	3.4	4.0
	1972/73	3005	30.0	47.7	15.4	2.5	4.2
	1973/74	3318	36.4	46.8	10.9	1.7	4.1
	1974/75	3925	38.7	46.2	10.8	1.1	3.1
700	1968/69	2008	25.7	49.9	22.9	1.3	00.0
	1969/70	2624	23.9	54.8	19.3	1.8	00.0
	1970/71	2154	28.2	49.4	19.4	2.8	00.0
	1971/72	1850	31.9	49.0	16.4	2.5	00.0
	1972/73	1835	37.3	46.5	13.9	2.1	00.0
	1973/74	1703	41.7	48.7	8.5	0.9	00.0
	1974/75	2222	33.3	51.4	13.8	1.3	00.0

FIGURE 1

PROPORTION OF GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE
GRADES AWARDED BY THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION
1969-1975

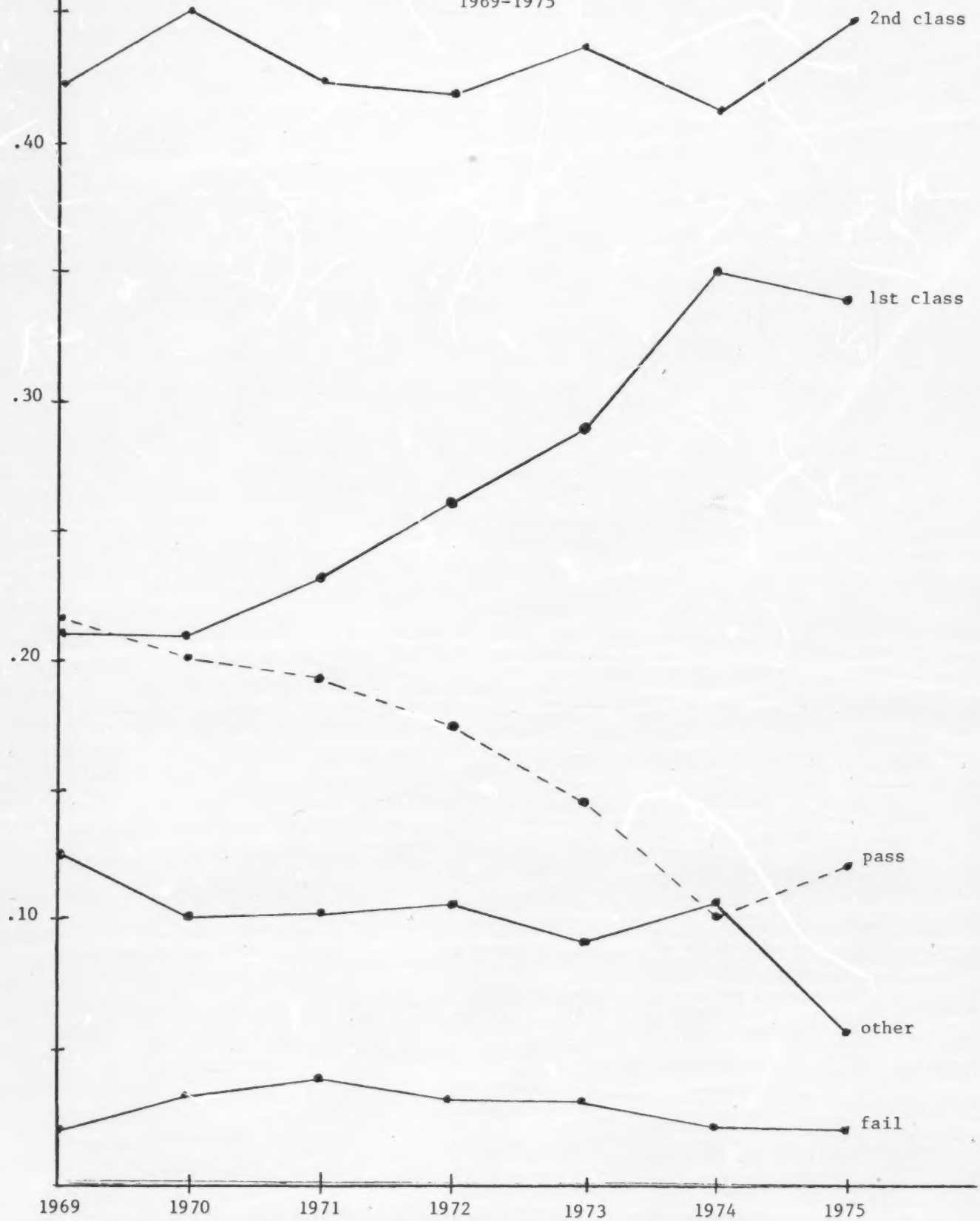

FIGURE 2

PROPORTION OF FIRST CLASS GRADES AWARDED IN
100, 200, 300 & 400, AND 700 LEVEL COURSES
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
1969-1975